What Is Playwork Under Neoliberalism?

November 20, 2018

Abstract:

The hegemony of neoliberal economic and social policy has had far-reaching cultural and political impacts in the UK and US, including changing the lives of children and governing the ways adults tend to think about childhood. Neoliberalism renders vast numbers of children deficient, devoid of value, or invisible, while encouraging the placement of a wide array of adult political and environmental anxieties in a socially-constructed neoliberal ideal of potential childhood success. The field of playwork is uniquely situated as a profession working "with" instead of "over" children, but we are not immune to the impacts of this colonization of childhood. By lifting our eyes to see past the trope of the over-scheduled child of affluenza, playwork advocates and practitioners can improve our practice and place our advocacy within a context of revolutionary hope.

This paper was inspired by the writing of Wendy Russell and Mike Wragg in the recently-published "Aspects of Playwork: Play & Culture Studies, Volume 14," and quotes extensively from their work while attempting to apply some of the ideas they articulate to a US context informed by race and class.

Author:

Ben Dalbey lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and is co-founder of Free For All Baltimore, a child-led community building project.

What Is Playwork Under Neoliberalism?

> Neoliberalism commonly refers to a theory of political and economic practices which propose that the common good is best served by increasing individual entrepreneurial freedom, promoting private ownership, reducing public spending and by maximizing the reach and frequency of competitive market transactions. The rise of contemporary neoliberalism as the dominant force in British [and U.S. -bd] politics can be attributed to the policies initiated during the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), and strengthened throughout the 1980s by her unofficial transatlantic partnership with President Ronald Reagan. Whilst initially concerned primarily with matters of commerce and industry, such as market deregulation and the weakening of trade union powers, the policies of the neoliberal revolution, as it has been described, sought also to drive principles of competition into the heart of public policy (Harvey 2005). Throughout the 1980s and beyond, an emphasis on spending reduction, privatization, competition and deregulation led to "the promotion of new forms of public management and a form of governance in which neoliberal principles were advanced." (Jones 2003:107)

> …Although the pursuit of this ideology has undoubtedly benefited many, the numbers of those adversely affected, whether they be tribal peoples of Central America displaced by multi-national conglomerates' programmes of deforestation, or the people of Greece rendered destitute by the corporate greed of the international banking system, [or a few hundred thousand people in Baltimore surplused and warehoused in a racist, post-industrial, police surveillance state -bd], amount to many more. … Despite the evident environmental and human costs, neoliberalism has become so ubiquitous that its policies and practices inform the common-sense way we interpret, live in and understand the world, and in so doing have come to redefine and reconstruct children's lived experiences of their childhoods.[1]

Mike Wragg follows this very good definition and brief history of neoliberalism by writing that "neoliberal discourses of childhood are perhaps best exemplified in the ongoing political debate surrounding education." The lens of education policy is valuable to the field of playwork not because of an operational relationship between education and playwork (although there could be a compensatory relationship) but because education policy is the clearest window though which to see children as they are seen by the political and economic elites who govern our social system.

The history of the United States means that neoliberalism in this country has a freight train of racism running through its core. Curt Dudley-Marling provides a modern history of education policy in the US in his article, "The Return of the Deficit," published in the *Journal of Educational Controversy* in 2007. Dudley-Marling situates the origins of neoliberal education policy in the US before Reagan and describes the dynamics of No Child Left Behind (now ESSA) and the development of a national testing regime as part of a systemic confirmation of segregation and an overall deskilling of teaching and learning in the 1990s and 2000s:

> Education as the great leveler of social class is one of the enduring myths of American culture. With hard work and a good education "any American can grow up to be president." It was in this context that the *Brown v Bd. Of Education* decision of the US Supreme Court held such hope for African Americans. After decades of "inherently unequal" separate schooling sanctioned by the Supreme Court's *Plessy* decision, integrated classrooms and schools required by the *Brown* decision promised an antidote to the poverty and discrimination that limited the life chances of African Americans. The persistent achievement gap between Black (and Hispanic) students and their White counterparts (NAEP, 2003) and the re-segregation of American schools (Kozol, 2005a; Orfield & Yun, 1999) mock the promise of *Brown*. The reality of increasingly segregated schools in American cities has led many Americans, including Black Americans, "to set aside the promises of *Brown* … to settle for the promise made more than a century ago in *Plessy*

[1] Mike Wragg, "The Neoliberalisation of Childhood and the Future of Playwork," Aspects of Playwork, *Play & Cultures Studies, Volume 14*, edited by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes, Hamilton Books (2018)

v. Ferguson, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in which 'separate but equal' was accepted as a tolerable rationale for the perpetuation of a dual system in American society." (Kozol, 2005a, p. 34).

The evidence indicates, however, that accepting *separate* schools means settling for "savage inequalities" that characterize segregated schooling in the United States (Kozol, 1992, 2005a). Compared to affluent, predominantly White suburban schools, urban schools overpopulated by poor Black and Hispanic students are more likely to suffer from poorly maintained and overcrowded facilities, shortages of qualified teachers, an insufficiency of instructional resources and materials, and impoverished curricula that emphasizes "basis skills" to the exclusion of challenging curricula enacted in more affluent school districts (Kozol, 2005a).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has rightly focused on children who have, academically, been "left behind," a group in which poor Black and Hispanic children are over represented. Arguably, the testing and accountability mandates of *NCLB* insure that even separate schooling is equal; however, the evidence indicates that the principal effect of NCLB on students "left behind" is a narrow, skills-based "pedagogy of poverty" (Haberman, 1991, p. 290) "alleged to be aligned with governmentally established goals and standards [now the CCSS -bd] and ... suited to what are regarded as 'the special needs and learning styles' of low-income children." (Kozol, 2005a, pp. 63-64). [See, e.g., "EngageNY" -bd] The "special needs and learning styles" of low-income children are, in reality, code for presumed deficiencies in the language, culture, and experiences of poor and minority children and their families (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Payne, 2005). The danger is that a "pedagogy of poverty," by limiting low-income students' opportunities to experience rich, engaging curricula that characterizes the education of children in affluent schools, contributes to a process by which "intelligent, creative, cultured children [are] transformed … into seemingly 'slow,' deficited, acultured beings" (Gee, in Rogers, ix, 2003).

….

The deficit gaze is underpinned by a behavioral model of learning in which learning is operationally defined in terms of hierarchical sets of discrete skills and low-achieving students are constructed as people in need of de-contextualized skills and sub-skills. In this formulation, overcoming learning deficiencies – learning the right skills – requires more time and better methods. Linking learning to time leads to a general intensification of schooling, including longer school days, longer school years, more homework, increased use of grade retention, and , too often, the elimination of "frills" like art, music and even recess that take time

> away from learning skills.[2] Linking learning to methods leads to a "methods fetish" (Bartolomé, 1994) in which teaching is reduced to technique and students to test scores.

Dudley-Marling has brilliantly captured the deskilling, decontextualizing, and devaluing of the education – and ultimately the lives – of vast numbers of children over the last several decades. Dudley-Marling and Wragg both reference the "construction" of childhood in this neoliberal context, and Wragg explains the process with the same clarity he brings to the politics of neoliberalism:

> Social constructionism refers to the processes by which, in the words of Prout and James (1990: 7) "the immaturity of children is conceived and articulated in particular societies into culturally specific sets of ideas and philosophies, attitudes and practices." In a global market in which the value of children is measured by their test results, children themselves have been reconstructed as units of future socio-economic capital.[3] Within this market-defined reconceptualization the child is perceived as a "proto adult" (James and James, 2004), lacking the basic skills and competencies of the adult they will become. The future orientated temporal focus of this construct trivializes and dismisses the present everyday realities of childhood which is reconstructed as a time of "becoming" rather than "being," and establishes a relationship in which the child is regarded as deficient and subordinate to their adult superior. This construct not only implies that competency and value [or the opposites -bd] is something that is acquired the closer one is to becoming "adult, but also that these characteristics are necessarily (and only) belonging to adults, i.e. ones that children cannot possess." (James & James, 2004).[4]

---

[2] You may be tempted to see a familiarity in Dudley-Marling's analysis. Does he describe the plight of the much-considered "over-scheduled" affluent suburban child? No. The rarely-considered children he outlines here vastly outnumber the affluenzic and are the opposite of "over-scheduled."

[3] It is important to note that the future socio-economic capital of millions of children in the United States is valued at zero, an attribute reflected in politically-engineered test results, a lack of social affordances, and social structures including the school-to-prison pipeline.

[4] Wragg has more to say about this process and places the field of playwork in a role of "now"-focused resistance, summarized here: "Playwork finds itself in a fairly isolated position in resisting this societally dominant paradigm, which it does by equalizing the power distribution in the working relationship with the child, and by placing value on the child's immediacy, rather than their future adult-potential. Within this relationship the child is reconstructed as a competent social actor possessing specific skills and abilities *because* not *in spite* of their immaturity (Wragg 2011). Indeed, according to the internationally renowned children's rights advocate Roger Hart, Playwork is the only profession to work collaboratively or horizontally with children, rather than from a position of power and domination (Hart 2008). Although within this context children are afforded equal value to adults, it is important not to conflate this with the notion of equal status. Playwork recognizes that whilst children area capable autonomous

Wendy Russell approaches the process of this social construction of childhood with a dramatically illuminating and dialectical lens of "hope as an expression of value" and describes children as repositories for several kinds of related hopes and anxieties:

> Hope is a defining feature of being human; it helps us stay optimistic if we can imagine what a better life might look like (Lester and Russell, 2013). Children are a repository for our hope for a better life (Kraftl, 2008) and this can be seen in those who work with children, including playworkers. In this sense, hope is closely linked to value….
>
> Social policies relating to children and young people express hope both for and in children. These are manifest in a highly interventionist and technical approach to children and families policies, investing childhood with "a version of hopefulness based on maintaining competitiveness in global markets [this is explicitly the language of CCSS in the US -bd], couching this both in the moral language of equality and the pragmatic language of economy" (Lester and Russell, 2013, p.41). This future focus … territorializes children, rendering childhood a sight for adult colonization (Lester and Russell, 2013).[5]

The colonization is not just adult, but adult informed by the neoliberal process of social construction described by Wragg and Dudley-Marling. It is important to highlight Russell's observation that the process of this neoliberal colonization incorporates the language of equity, opportunity, and justice as well as success and competition, and is a process to which the field of playwork is not immune.

Russell also incorporates a framework offered by Cindi Katz to describe "the growing sense of insecurity about the future that manifests across three domains: political, geopolitical and environmental. Children become a repository for these anxieties, which play out across three configurations."

These ideas have a strong resonance in the contemporary United States, and the first two configurations of anxieties are very familiar to anyone acquainted with discussions of modern childhood. These are:

(1) the "child as accumulation strategy, where children become a site of economic, psychic and emotional investment. The quest for perfect childhoods can be seen in practices such as hothousing, competition for entry to the best schools and universities, extra tuition, hyperviligance and myriad parenting strategies;"[6] and
(2) the "child as ornament" …. Where "the ornament is a form of essentializing of childhood innocence so that anxieties over the loss of childhood innocence can be invoked to fuel the desire for vigilance and control."

---

agents, their biological immaturity renders them more vulnerable than adults and therefore in need of greater rights of protection from themselves and others (Wragg 2011)."

[5] Wendy Russell, "Nonsense, Caring and Everyday Hope: Rethinking the Value of Playwork," Aspects of Playwork, *Play & Cultures Studies, Volume 14*, edited by Fraser Brown and Bob Hughes, Hamilton Books (2018)
[6] Ah! Finally, we see the much-discussed and worried-over over-scheduled child!

Now we get to something revolutionary:

"The third configuration of the "child as waste" has particular relevance here. The fear of a wasted youth feeds the niche marketing that underpins the first two configurations."

Underneath, and in fact supporting, the "niche marketing" of the "child as accumulation strategy" and the "child as ornament" lies a much larger, deeper well of "those children and families who do not conform to or cannot achieve the normative [neoliberal -bd] ideal."

Russell describes her familiarity with this configuration:

> Many of the children at the Play Centre fitted into this configuration, and were subject to myriad 'waste management' policy interventions through the welfare, education, health and justice systems, and even, perhaps, through playwork itself. Early adventure playgrounds were welcomed by the authorities as a way of keeping delinquent boys off the streets. In my research, the Play Centre received funding from the Children's Fund, aimed directly at working with children deemed at risk of poor outcomes.

The "child as waste" is a configuration described in the United States by Ralph Ellison in a 1963 address to teachers titled "What these children are like,"[7] with continued relevance to today:

> Yet here was a child who lived in a hotbed of everything that middle-class people fear: the tuberculosis rate was sky-high, crime, prostitution, bootlegging, illness. There was all of the disintegration which you find among rural Negroes who are pounding themselves to death against the sharp edges of an urban environment. Yet Oklahoma City at that time was one of the most wonderful places I've ever known. Imagination was freely exercised by the kids. They made toys. They made and taught themselves to play musical instruments. They lived near the city dump, and they converted the treasures they found there to their own uses. This was an alive community in which the harshness of slum life was inescapable, but in which the strength and imagination of these people was much in evidence. Yet you would have to say that it was indeed lower class, and lower-lower class and, according to the sociologists[8], utterly hopeless. Certainly it was no place to search for good minds or fine talent.
>
> But how many geniuses do you get *anywhere*? And where *do* you find a first-class imagination? Who really knows? Imagination is where you find it; thus we must search the whole scene. But how many pretentious little kids have we been able to develop through progressive education!

[7] http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-these-children-are-like/

[8] Such as Betty Hart and Todd Risley, who just over thirty years later would conduct their study of racialized perceived language deficiency in not Oklahoma but Kansas City, lending sociological "research" to support the neoliberal construction of childhood deficiency and decades of "waste management" policies in the United States.

> ….These kids with whom we're concerned, these dropouts, are living critics of their environment, of our society and our educational system, and they are quite savage critics of some of their teachers.
>
> I don't know what intelligence is. But this I do know, both from life and from literature: whenever you reduce human life to two plus two equals four, the human element within the human animal says, "I don't give a damn." You can work on that basis, but the kids cannot.

There are a number of possible conclusions to draw from these insights and analysis, and Wendy Russell and Mike Wragg offer two – in my view conflicting – possible conclusions in their respective chapters of the new "Aspects of Playwork" volume.

Wragg's conclusion might be more familiar. He writes:

> With no credible opposition to this hegemonic [neoliberal] political ideology history suggests that the dominant conceptualizations of childhood and play appear unlikely to change any time soon. Consequently Playwork finds itself in a quandary: a political case for play built on Playwork's guiding principles seems increasingly likely to fall on deaf ears, whilst appealing to a neoliberal agenda by promoting play's development value risks undermining its own argument. As Playwork's political influence and credibility looks likely to further recede, salvation may be sought in two unlikely arenas. Firstly, the traditionally didactic and instructive teaching and assessment methods of the East Asian countries that the UK [and US are] apparently seeking to emulate have been found to correlate negatively with nations' entrepreneurial confidence and activities (Zhao, 2012). In response these countries' education reforms cede control to children because it is precisely the freedom of choice and control in playing which enhances the "soft skills" and entrepreneurial capabilities so highly sought after by global business and commerce. Secondly, business and commerce is itself embracing the "fun, freedom and flexibility" of play in the work place because it drives up profit margins by increasing productivity, efficiency, motivation and morale, whilst reducing stress, illness and absenteeism (Karl et al. 2005). It is the "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated" (Hughes 1984) characteristics of play that develops children's creativity, flexibility, problem solving and innovation, which according to Zhao (2012), citing Auerswald (2012), will bring "coming prosperity to the world," and it's difficult to conceive of a neoliberalist worth his salt who wouldn't want to be a part of that.

These conclusions will be familiar to anyone who has read any article written by Peter Gray in "Psychology Today," attended any conference or professional development event organized to advocate for or defend play in childhood, written a grant application or looked for funding for any play program, spoken with parents about the value of play for their children, or generally been awake in the field for the last many years.

However, there are two big problems with these conclusions.

The first is that, rather than bringing "coming prosperity to the world," neoliberalism is making the world uninhabitable for humans. The second is that, while targets of the "niche marketing" of childhood as accumulation strategy and child as ornament might respond positively along with the "neoliberalist worth his salt" to increasing productivity, profit margins, and entrepreneurial confidence, the success of these endeavors rests and relies on the much larger and deeper well of children as waste.

The success of "fun flexible" economic leadership in the US can be measured by rates of childhood hunger, the homelessness of children in public schools, the racist criminalization of the existence of children of color, and a 1 percent of the US population which owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.

Playwork advocates and practitioners can wear blinders to these facts, identify with the success of neoliberalism, and advocate for a "play movement" which further supports the neoliberal colonization of childhood. We can direct our work toward populations of children who are either most likely to successfully operationalize "intrinsic motivation" in their adult lives or are at least willing to hope for such a future within the neoliberal context.

Or, we can look for revolutionary hope.

Wendy Russell writes of an "ethos underpinning the playwork sector" in the late 1960s and 1970s which "expressed broad optimism in children's futures being *politically* rather than *individually* better through supporting the development of a class consciousness."

There are credible oppositions to the hegemony of neoliberalism. What if "the play movement" looked to these oppositions, to social movements inspired by Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, RedForEd, and all of their diverse and similarly-spirited advocates and agents who live with and around us? What if we seek the appropriation of time, space and resources towards childhood in ways that work toward destruction, liberation and insurgency? What if we hold up a model of working with children who are "at risk" of "wasting their youth" in ways which focus on nonsense?

Russell writes eloquently of the "childhood-hope" that exists within the lived space of a playwork setting:

> Here we shift our gaze from the dominant conceived and perceived space to an acknowledgment of the importance of moments in lived space. This is to do with alternative understandings of play and an appreciation of children's desire to appropriate time and space for just being and just playing. Rather than play's benefits being deferred until adulthood, they might be understood through play's capacity to enliven everyday life as it is in the here and now (and of course will affect the future too). In my research, it was evident that the playworkers got this, and in informal conversations, they gleefully related stories of moments of pure nonsense…..
>
> Playwork's instrumental value can be articulated in terms of its ability to offer the children the conditions for playful experiences they would not

have elsewhere, and all the benefits this has for children both in the here and now and in the future. It can also be articulated in terms of addressing social policy agendas such as anti-social behavior, skills development, physical activity and so on. Yet, these instrumental outcomes can only be ethically claimed if understood as part of the overall assemblage that is a playwork setting: the combination of, for example, relationships, material and symbolic objects, space, histories, playfulness and caring that constitutes what is unique about the work. This has implications for how playwork's uniqueness is articulated, both within and outside the playwork community. At the moment, we seek to show just how serious play is, when perhaps we should also be extolling its non-seriousness – in a dialectical relationship of course.